(b) if so, whether the above Bank has been permitted to discontinue with the payment of PF contributions of the employees?

THE MINISTER OF LABOUR (SHRI SAHIB SINGH VERMA): (a) Karnataka State Co-operative Apex Bank had applied for exemption under Employees Pension Scheme, 1995. Since the proposed pension scheme of the Bank was not at par with the Employees Pension Scheme, 1995, the proposal was accordingly returned to the Bank for rectification.

(b) No, Sir.

**U.S. attack on Iraq**

*405. SHRI LALIT SURI: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) whether it is a fact that United States attacked Iraq in the early hours of the 20th March, 2003;

(b) if so, Government's reaction thereto;

(c) steps taken by the Government through the aegis of the United Nations Security Council to avert war between the two countries; and

(d) the steps taken by Government to ensure minimum loss of civilian lives and property and the results thereof?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI DIGVIJAY SINGH): (a) to (d) Coalition forces led by the USA started military action in Iraq on 20th March 2003. Government expressed its deepest anguish at the commencement of military operations in Iraq, which lacked justification and was avoidable.

Though not a member of the United Nations Security Council, India participated in all Open Meetings of the Security Council and had consistently urged peaceful resolution, within the framework of the United Nations, of the issue of Iraq's compliance with Security Council resolutions.

Government has urged all parties to the conflict to meet their obligations towards civilians under international humanitarian laws and begin large-scale effort to alleviate the human suffering in Iraq. Government has offered India's help in this regard.

**Linking of major ports**

†*408. SHRI ABHAY KANT PRASAD: Will the Minister of ROAD TRANSPORT AND HIGHWAYS be pleased to state:

(a) the details of the action plan prepared for linking of major ports with the road network;

(b) whether its feasibility study has been completed; and

(c) if so, the details with regard to the ports to be linked through road network in Jharkhand?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF ROAD TRANSPORT AND HIGHWAYS (MAJOR GENERAL (RETD.) B.C. KHANDURI): (a) It has been decided to improve road connectivity to 10 major ports in the country. The details are given in the enclosed Statement. All the projects are targeted for completion by December, 2005.

(b) Yes, Sir.

(c) the nearest ports from Jharkhand are Calcutta and Haldia Ports, which are connected through National Highways-6 and 41.

***Statement***

*Port connectivity projects*

| Sl. No. | Port | Stretch | Length in Km | Status | Target for completion |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | Kandla | NH-8A (Samkhiali-Gandhidham) | 56 | Work completed | Completed |
| 2. | Mormugao | NH-17B (from Port to Verna Junction on NH-17 | 18 | Civil work contract awarded and work is in progress | December, 2003 |

†Original notice of the question was received in Hindi.